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Spying gains a little respect from arms negotiators

The SALT II treaty includes a historic breakthrough which led the Soviet chief delegate, Vladimir Semenov, once to exclaim: "We have just overturned 400 years of Russian history." What startled him so much was the change in instructions he had just received from Moscow authorizing him to disclose the numbers of Soviet missiles launchers, according to their relevant categories, and include them in the body of the treaty.

Especially during the SALT I negotiations it was obvious to his American opposite numbers that Mr. Semenov and his experts knew much less about the numbers of Soviet weapons than did the U.S. negotiators, thanks to American intelligence. Gerard Smith, the American SALT I negotiator, was even reprimanded once by a Soviet officer for discussing Soviet figures, based on American intelligence, in front of Soviet negotiators who did not have proper security clearances.

In SALT I, data of that sort compiled by the Americans were included in the agreement but never formally accepted by the Russians. They simply agreed not to challenge them. But in SALT II, agreed numbers are essential to make specific reductions to a new ceiling possible. And the only way to measure whether the Russians did indeed fulfill their commitment to reduce the number of launchers to 2,250 by the end of 1981 is through being able to count the numbers actually destroyed, which can only be done if both sides begin with an agreed ceiling. It thus imposes strict accountability on the Russians.

However earthshaking or historic an event this disclosure was to the Soviet delegation, to the Americans it was nothing more than a confirmation of their own intelligence information. Still, it was an admission that the kind of legitimate spying by national means that is going on is essential, tolerable and effective.

It has also become easier to discuss such a delicate subject as verification with Russian experts who are not only more knowledgeable than they used to be, but also willing to go into some detail.

They are still concerned about many of their own secrets and make the legitimate point that under SALT they are only prohibited from encoding any telemetered data that are necessary for monitoring the compliance with the treaty provisions, for they are still anxious to protect some of the information an ICBM sends out during a test to a ground station by electronic means such as, for instance, the resilience of its metal casing under stress. This is the kind of information that is not covered by the treaty, it is a production secret.

Naturally, the intelligence community would like to get all the answers, but the development and the revamping of a major weapons system requires at least 20 test flights over a period of about two years, ample time to detect any serious Soviet violations under the treaty. The U.S. uses a vast network consisting of radar, radio, electro-optical systems and infrared photography on the ground, in the air, under the sea and in space to keep a watchful eye on Soviet weapons developments and more. To cheat therefore would involve risks that could quickly lead to the abrogation of the treaty when detected. Also, however much the Russians know about the capabilities of that interlocking monitoring network, they

must assume that they do not know everything.

Current American efforts to persuade the Russians to publicly endorse U2 overflights over Turkey, however, are unlikely to succeed for political rather than technological reasons. The history of attacks on American bases in Turkey may be hard for the Kremlin to reverse and the implication of interference with another country's sovereignty provides an easy excuse for rejecting this idea. However this does not mean, according to those concerned, that the Russians are not aware of the problems, the Carter administration is facing in Congress over the ratification of the treaty. It is not impossible, therefore, that they might agree to the use of the so-called "black boxes" as proposed for the monitoring of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty. These boxes contain seismic instruments which would be positioned on Soviet soil near the testing sites. So far, however, the Russians have insisted in the test ban negotiations that Russian rather than American personnel collect the measurements, which is not acceptable to the U.S.

In the SALT II context, Russian agreement to such on-site devices as these "black boxes" may well have more political significance than military value, but what is encouraging about the broader acceptance of technological spying is that, however slowly and however reluctantly, the Russians have come to accept the fact that it is an important ingredient in the preservation of world stability — even if it meant overturning 400 years of Russian history.